

## Building a Tatar elite

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## **Building a Tatar elite**

### *Language and national schooling in Kazan*

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**ABSTRACT** Tatarstan, a bi-cultural region in the Russian Federation, has been experiencing a significant revival of Tatar language, culture and ethnic identities during the post-Soviet period. This article examines the significance of language policy in schools, and elite Tatar schools in particular, for this Tatar renaissance. It describes the political context and institutional setting and uses qualitative research data to analyse ethnic identification among pupils, parents and teachers. It shows that language has central importance in the Tatar schools and is treated as essential to what it means to be Tatar. Till now, the ‘Tatarstan model’ of partial autonomy within the Russian Federation has successfully accommodated ethnic diversity. However, asymmetries between ‘national’ education in Tatar schools and predominantly Russian education in non-Tatar schools have potential to generate tensions, as the republic of Tatarstan develops its policies for interethnic relations, religion and culture.

**KEYWORDS** ethnicity ● language policy ● post-Soviet ● Russia ● schools ● Tatarstan

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the republic of Tatarstan in the Russian Federation has been experiencing a significant renaissance of Tatar ethnicity and culture. This is reflected in formal public policies and procedures, as well as through informal rejections of previous Russian or

Soviet identifications. The 1992 constitution defined Tatarstan as a multi-ethnic republic, with two official languages, Russian and Tatar.<sup>1</sup> The largest ethnic groups are Tatars and Russians, and they correspond approximately to the two main confessions, Muslim and Orthodox. Tatarstan promotes itself as an example of interethnic stability in the post-Soviet context and is widely recognized as such. The society has many prominent bi-cultural features. For example, inside the walls of the Kremlin in the capital city of Kazan, the coexistence of a new mosque and an ancient cathedral is typically presented as a symbol of the harmonious relations between the different ethnic and religious groups in the republic.

This article reports on a study of one aspect of these developments, namely Tatar language and education.<sup>2</sup> Previous research on Tatarstan includes surveys of politics (McAuley, 1997), ethnicity (Drobizheva et al., 1996), business (McCann, 2005), religion (Daucé, 2003; Mohammattshin, 2001), media and language (Davis et al., 2000). Schooling has received less attention, despite its continuing high status in line with Soviet tradition and its prominence in the cultural policies of the Tatar elite. The research presented here highlights two aspects of the developing ethnic identifications among pupils attending Tatar schools. First, it shows the priority of language as a sign of belonging. It is, of course, a 'contingent marker' (May, 2001: 10) because the relationship between language and ethnicity is not fixed. But we will show that it is more than just another sign among many. Second, it indicates a potential problem in the asymmetry of the language policy that encourages young Tatars to develop a unified 'national' identity, combining language, ethnicity, religion and other elements, which is not matched by the policy as it affects young Russians, who neither expect to speak Tatar nor are likely to express their identities in these terms.

The Tatars are a Turkic people whose ethnic origins are still the subject of scholarly debate. The Kazan Tatars were established in the central Volga region by the 13th century (Hanauer, 1996; Rorlich, 2000). The history of the language reflects the changing influences on Tatar culture. Until 1860, the language amongst Volga-Ural Tatars was old-Tatar, with Arabic and Persian influences (Iskhakov, 1997a). In 1927, the Latin alphabet (*Yanalif*) was officially recognized as the Tatar language alphabet, replacing the Arabic (Iskhakov, 1997a: 25). However, as a result of Russification policies, the use of Latin script was replaced by Cyrillic at the end of the 1930s. More recently, the effect of perestroika was to launch an active struggle by nationalists and Tatars from the Soviet power structure for the rebirth of Tatar national identity, culture and language. National schools were reopened, where Tatar language became the medium of teaching, and Tatar language classes were promoted once again, with the aim of returning to the same conditions of active Tatar cultural and language development that had occurred at the beginning of the 20th century.

On 15 February 1994, after three years of negotiations, Kazan and Moscow signed a bilateral treaty that was politically and symbolically crucial for Tatarstan's future. The treaty was acclaimed as an historic symbol that Moscow and Kazan had reached a peaceful accommodation that allowed a substantial amount of autonomy to the republic. The concept of a 'Tatarstan Model' was born on 3 October 1994 when President Mintimir Shaimiev visited Harvard University (Iskhakov, 1995). According to his speech, it is a concept that involves a harmonious relationship between Moscow and Kazan, reducing political conflict between the centre and region, maintaining cooperation, and simultaneously allowing Tatarstan a degree of financial and juridical independence. The notion of a 'Tatarstan Model'<sup>3</sup> is usually presented as a positive contrast to other regions, especially in the Caucasus, where claims to sovereignty have led to violent confrontations and conflicts. It remains a model of continuous adaptation and compromise in a search for balance with Moscow. Tatarstan is atypical within Russia because of the high proportion of non-Russians in a region that lies geographically, economically and politically within the heart of the federation.<sup>4</sup>

The idiosyncrasies of the political arena should not be underestimated. Politics in Tatarstan is characterized by a quasi-feudal system and a Tatar ethnopolitical monopoly with virtually no opposition (Löwenhardt, 1997: 133; Sagitova, 1998: 65).<sup>5</sup> There has been a consistent trend towards the Tatarization of the governmental elite (Gorenburg, 1999; McAuley, 1997: 87). The legislative, executive and judicial powers in Tatarstan are in the hands of a small and tightly knit group, the clientele of President Shaimiev (Löwenhardt, 1997: 133), or what is known in other circles as Shaimiev's clan or the *khanate* (McCann, 2005: 52). However, according to Mukhariamov, it is an oversimplification to talk about ethnocracy and better in the context of Tatarstan to refer to 'agrobureaucracy'.<sup>6</sup> The agrobureaucracy is a group of people with a shared culture and model of behaviour, from rural backgrounds, who made their career during the Soviet period in the rural environment. Generally, they come from veterinary, pedagogical or agrarian institutes, though a lawyer could be equally eligible. Tatar is usually their first language but they all speak Russian because it is essential for interaction in the cities. Their strong social networks provide support for political careers and encourage group cohesion. They are the main promoters of Tatar national education and closely involved in the running of Tatar national schools (*gymnásias*).<sup>7</sup> The promotion of Tatar language in the republic is one of their central ambitions.

## THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN CONTEXT: NATIONAL GYMNASÍAS

Schooling is a powerful mechanism of language maintenance and promotion, and it can be an effective reproductive apparatus and transmitter of specific cultures and identities. 'It is, in a large part, through their schools that ethnic communities define themselves, define their past, define their future, define their goals and orient their future leaders' (Fishman, 1985: 373). Education 'enables a large number of people to learn, simultaneously, which ethnic group they belong to and what are the cultural characteristics of that group' (Eriksen, 1993: 91). Similarly, Bourdieu argues, the education system primarily performs the: 'function of conserving, inculcating and consecrating a cultural heritage. This is its "internal" and most "essential function"' (cited in Swartz, 1997: 190–1).

In the context of Tatarstan, new national *gymnásias* are the response and alternative to 70 years of the Soviet regime, and to all the previous policies of Russification. They are also a form of adaptation by the Tatar elite to the new configuration of power relationships between the main ethnic groupings in Tatarstan and the balance of power between the republic and Moscow. The response is a form of a revival of a distinct Tatar identity and culture with some aspects of exclusivity and 'uniqueness' coexisting with pragmatic adaptation to the demands of a bi-cultural society.

Jadidism, an Islamic reform movement that was influential at the end of the 19th century, demanded a more modern education, and considered the native language to be indispensable as the language of instruction, but with Russian as a compulsory subject. The first Tatar *gymnásia* (*F. Aitovoi*) opened in Kazan in 1916. It was a model for elite national education, and in many respects the model has survived in the concept of the contemporary Tatar school as a secular centre focused on national education, giving high priority to Tatar language, literature and Tatar history, with all subjects taught though the medium of Tatar (Ialalov, 1996). The school was closed in 1918 shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution. The Soviet strategy then focused on the aim of universal literacy – in the vernacular in primary school education but increasingly in Russian at higher levels, including the elite national schools. During the early 1930s, there was considerable oscillation in schooling policies, but from that period to the beginning of the 1990s, national education was a very marginal option. Only Tatars and Bashkirs had instruction in their own language for the entire duration of their secondary education (Kaiser, 1994: 257) and such schools were more common in rural areas than in the cities. By 1990, only one school remained in the city of Kazan where children could study through the medium of Tatar language (Lotfullin and Guryanova, 1996).

Today, the school system in Tatarstan, as in the rest of the Russian

Federation, displays the same top-down structure that characterized the Soviet educational regime. Article 4 of the Law of the Russian Federation on Education specifies the secular nature of the state system of education.<sup>8</sup> But in Tatarstan, as elsewhere in the Russian Federation, there are 'new type' or innovative centres, including *gymnásias* defined by particular subject specialities, language or ethnicity. The main difference between *gymnásias* and other schools is the level of specialization. The *gymnásia* curriculum has prestige and elite associations – historically because of its high standards and level of specialization, and also because of the close connection between these schools and a specific social class, the intelligentsia.

In the early 1990s, with the burgeoning cultural-national movement, the meaning of 'national' schooling changed significantly. The previous concept of the national school as a place for a standard education delivered through a language other than Russian was overtaken by the idea of a new type of elite national educational centre, the Tatar *gymnásia*. These new schools were perceived as a potential vehicle for Tatar culture and language development, and the political elite began to pay close attention to the issue. The number of Tatar *gymnásias* grew considerably during the 1990s. In 1998 in Kazan, a city of over one million inhabitants, there were 189 schools, including 36 centres of the 'new type' with Tatar as a medium for teaching (Ponomareva and Platonova, 1998). In practice, the Tatar *gymnásias* are dedicated to monocultural and monoethnic transmission, echoing the institutions created during earlier stages of Tatar cultural revival. Their clear objective is to provide education based on national ethnic culture, and popular traditions.

According to Ialalov there are three main features that define Tatar *gymnásias*. First, they aim to guarantee a national orientation, national consciousness and patriotism. Second, they involve strategies for individual development and self-realization. And third, they aim to educate young people in the musical, artistic and aesthetic values of the national culture (1996: 13–4). In practice, the *gymnásias* are effective instruments for Tatar culture and language revival because of the strong encouragement and support they receive from the political elite, which is openly expressed. In the words of the then Minister of Education:

Nowadays, national schooling appears as a key factor in any people's national rebirth. Only schooling can guarantee the opportunity for national cultural development. It makes it [national culture] accessible to each person, modulates people's identity as a carrier and transmitter of their traditions, and also transmits general human cultural – egalitarian values. (Kharisov, 1997: 79)

In official post-Soviet definitions, national schools are presented as schools for dialogue, meeting points of culture, which educate pupils in and reinforce national and ethno-cultural tolerance (Vestnik Obrazovaniia,

1991: 26). This rhetoric of tolerance and cultural respect is not always matched inside actual institutions, where discourses surrounding the purpose of Tatar education dwell more on distinctiveness and difference than multiethnic integration. For that reason, it would be a mistake to analyse Tatar schooling in isolation, or to detach the elite schools from their relationships to the Tatar political and economic elite, family influences, and the agrobureaucracy from which they receive substantial support.

## THE RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DATA

One of the most compelling reasons for the focus on elite Tatar schools is the fact that, although they are not typical or representative of Tatarstan generally, they are among the clearest manifestations of the processes of Tatarization taking place in the republic. They are institutions specially designed to create, or re-establish, reinforce and develop the Tatar national culture and identities that only a small group of Tatar intellectuals and artists could legitimately claim during the Soviet period. This research into everyday interaction in education complements the work of historians, political scientists and others who have examined the workings of the 'Tatarstan model' in government institutions.

The research took place over three years, beginning as a pilot study conducted in Kazan between September 1997 and April 1998. Most issues of access via gatekeepers such as head teachers were negotiated during this first phase. Three further periods of fieldwork, using observation, interviews with experts, teachers, headmistresses, parents and pupils, and documentary sources followed: from March–June 1999; October–December 1999; and August–September 2000. This was based on 57 unstructured interviews (additional to 14 interviews from the pilot study) conducted in Russian.<sup>9</sup> Data were collected from two different types of institutions, Tatar and non-Tatar *gymnásias* (Alvarez Veinguer, 2002). Two Tatar schools in Kazan (numbers 2 and 16) are described in the present account. The parallel research in the non-Tatar schools provides data for a more general interpretation of processes of 'de-Sovietization' and diversity in the school system. The non-Tatar schools allow much less room for Tatar culture and traditions – even when nearly half of the pupils come from Tatar ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, despite their rapid growth since 1991, it is important to emphasize that the Tatar *gymnásias* represent a small proportion of the whole spectrum of secondary education, and they can even be considered a 'special option', because only certain children can access them. The justification for focusing on this type of school is their clarity of purpose and social significance in terms of the 'national' project. A remarkably rigid and essentialist interpretation of Tatar language exists within the Tatar

*gymnásias* among pupils, teachers and parents. It is the ultimate defining characteristic of the Tatar nation and people (*natsiia*), umbilically attached to the assumed 'givens' of territory, ethos, kinship, religious community and particular social practices (Geertz, 1996: 41). Recovery and revival of the Tatar language is presented as one of the main priorities by teachers, parents and pupils alike. Its renewal would allow Tatars to transform and (re-)formulate their relation with their Russian neighbours and, in particular, with the federal centre, Moscow.

The research entailed an in-depth, extended exploration of processes of identity construction, or 'identization' in the school environment.<sup>10</sup> The focus is not simply on language issues, but on difference, the meanings of otherness, living in a multiethnic society, religiosity and family and marriage, and patriotism. The method is ethnographic, reflecting the study's emphasis on the process of schooling, interaction between teachers, pupils and parents, and the discursive construction of Tatar (and Russian) belonging. Formal aspects of curriculum planning, language policy or pedagogical technique are included as background to the main body of data, which comes from a variety of sources: observation of classes, extra-curricular activities and informal interaction in the school setting; open-ended interviews with pupils, parents and teachers; informal conversations individually and in groups with these participants; and more formal, semi-structured interviews with experts. The approach is therefore qualitative with a strong emphasis on the intersubjective positioning of the researcher as a 'semi-insider' in the research relationship. The field researcher had the advantage of being both an 'insider' with Russian education and fluent Russian language, and an 'outsider' from western Europe.<sup>11</sup> The data are interpreted as the multidimensional expression of political discourse, institutional practice and everyday meanings, not bound by predetermined categories.

## **TATAR CULTURAL TRANSMISSION: DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY AND EXCLUSIVITY**

### ***Gymnásia No. 2, Moskovskii raion (district)***

This is a well-known and prestigious Tatar *gymnásia* in Kazan. The school has 700 pupils and 30 classes with 20 or 21 pupils in each. The majority of pupils and teachers are Tatars.<sup>12</sup> A visitor to the school encounters a hive of activity, especially near the headmistress's office, since there is a constant stream of events, seminars, conferences, guests from other cities, local and foreign journalists, exhibitions and diverse performances. *Gymnásia* No. 2 represents a model of the Tatar *gymnásia* for the entire



republic. It is a well-established institution with a tradition of 40 years' working only with Tatar children. Before 1990, the school was a Tatar orphanage, the only place in the city where most of the education was in Tatar and where children came from all over Tatarstan. As more than one teacher claimed, 'we always had a Tatar spirit here'. In 1990, it was reopened as a Tatar *gymnásia*. Tatar is used as the medium for teaching in the school and Tatar cultural transmission is one of the main objectives. The headmistress confirmed that 'the objective of our school is the re-birth and development of national education, to educate within these walls a national intelligentsia'.<sup>13</sup>

The curriculum is based on 'classical education', which is adapted in specific ways to the circumstances. For example, instead of logic, students study chess twice per week as a compulsory subject, not a hobby or a voluntary workshop. As a substitute for Latin, they study Arabic (three hours per week) because, as the headmistress stressed, all their spiritual wealth is in Arabic. In addition to Tatar and Russian languages they also have five hours a week of English from the first school year, and Turkish as an optional language from the fifth to the eleventh school year, plus ballroom dancing, Tatar craft workshops and Tatar wrestling. Apart from the multitude of events that take place in the school, the headmistress also organizes a variety of extra-curricular events, including numerous seminars and conferences. She is a key figure, in her individual as well as institutional capacity, in the process of national education revival in the republic, and she is a strong and enthusiastic promoter of the project. The prevailing language in school is Tatar although some conversations in Russian can be heard among pupils when out of the teachers' earshot. Many pupils will admit that they prefer to speak Russian with their classmates because they feel more comfortable when talking about such topics as television or reading.

### ***Gymnásia No. 16, Privolskii raion (district)***

The first research visit to the school took place in 1998 when staff were preparing everything for 1 September, the official day for the inauguration of the centre. From the architectural point of view, the new and ostentatious building (inside and out) conforms to traditional Tatar canons, the Arabic style with domes, arches and minaret-like towers. It contrasts sharply with the monolithic blocks of the Soviet type that dominate the school architecture in Kazan. It is decorated with marble and stylish furnishing, such as sofas and decorative elements that are usually quite absent in other schools, where the Soviet austere style still predominates. School No. 16 benefits from very good equipment, including a swimming pool, two sports centres, a dance studio, a sound laboratory, two computer rooms, two language laboratories, and a very large canteen. Classrooms are spacious, each

designed for only 20 pupils, or a maximum of 25. Generally, in other schools, classrooms are for 30 to 35 or, occasionally, even more pupils. The school has 600 pupils (from all districts), but from its scale, one would expect it to house a much larger number.

According to the headmistress, there are enough specialists to teach all the subjects in Tatar, apart from computing and Russian language and literature, (which are in Russian); and they dedicate the same number of hours (six per week) to Tatar and Russian language and literature (as in *gymnásia* 2). They study English from the second school year, and after the fifth year they have a second foreign language; Arabic or Turkish. However, they were forced to stop these classes because teachers were not available. This *gymnásia*, according to the headmistress, is:

for all Tatar parents who want their children to study in a national school, and we select the most qualified pupils. We organize a special committee including a psychologist and different professionals, musicians, dancing teachers, and drawing teachers, amongst others.

The implicit message in these words is that the school is not only for 'the best pupils' but for 'the best Tatar pupils'. According to the research interviews and observation, all the pupils are Tatars, but Russian pupils could in theory be accepted if their parents wanted them to study in Tatar.

According to the headmistress, the *gymnásia*'s main goal is to combine general academic knowledge and national education, which she claims is the perfect combination; all the courses and workshops are focused on national content:

We don't want our school to be just a normal school, we want it to be a centre for our leaders, Tatar leaders, dedicated to Tatar culture, poets, writers [. . .] these things that somehow were lost during Soviet times. There are so many Russian schools in Kazan, and we have to equal this number, and our parents want their children to study in our schools, without fear, knowing that one day they will go to the university. They will manage to find their way and they will not be afraid; everything will be in their mother tongue. There is a future for Tatar people. We want to transmit our national spirit, so when people come to the school they will feel that this is a Tatar school.

In both schools, there were constant references to the significance of the mother tongue. It represented the clearest boundary marker in teachers' and pupils' representations of 'others' and in the construction of collective identities. Other markers are less distinct. Muslim religion, for example, typically understood in terms of historical tradition, is taken for granted as part of being Tatar but is less closely connected with the everyday life of the respondents.<sup>14</sup> Further analysis of the position of Tatar language will highlight the significance of language in the school setting.

## ATTITUDES TO THE TATAR LANGUAGE: REINFORCING 'PRIMORDIAL TIES'

What attitudes do Tatar *gymnásia* pupils have to the Tatar language and what does the Tatar language mean to them? The father of a male pupil explained that he chose a Tatar *gymnásia* (in this case No. 16) for his son because they are Tatar. He did not want him to go to a Russian school because they do not teach the Tatar language there, and he would forget everything he knew 'because they promote the Russian language and Christian propaganda'. His son says:

... in here we are all Tatars together, it is possible to say that [...] here somehow we can talk about Russians with our Tatars, yes, because if there were Russian children in our group, we would not speak to them in a direct way. Generally about Russian *natsiia* or Tatar *natsiia* and we feel more free here, in this environment. But ... there is no discrimination towards the people, because we are in Tatarstan and we are all at the same level, Russians and Tatars. It is just, I suppose, my parents wanted me to study and ... to learn to speak in my mother tongue. (Male pupil, 15 years old)

He added: 'but also because the teachers are Tatars and they have a closer relationship with us, you can say that they are concerned about us'. This pupil gives a very clear explanation of why he likes the school, not just because it is one of the best equipped schools in Kazan or because of his friends, or the teachers. The reasons are simpler and yet more subtle. The fundamental attraction is that they are all Tatars. He feels at ease inside his clan, free to talk about the 'others' and to define himself. He justifies himself saying that there is no discrimination, but there is a desire for segregation. He implies that Russian teachers do not care about Tatar pupils, or Tatar teachers do not look after Russian pupils. With little hesitation he expresses what he thinks, which in all likelihood corresponds to what his parents and teachers think: that Tatar people are much better off amongst Tatars. He may be unaware of the implications of what he is saying about the absence of discrimination, nevertheless he prefers to study with Tatar people and Tatar teachers because he feels secure.

One of the Tatar history teachers, who had been working in *gymnásia* No. 2 from the first day it opened, recalled that the first group of pupils came from a very specific social stratum. They were the children of the intelligentsia, such as teachers and doctors, people devoted to a cultural tradition. They were among the first to make the effort because they understood that it was impossible for a renaissance to occur if the children could not speak the language. More broadly based efforts to bring about a language shift had encountered serious problems. According to sociological research conducted in Kazan in 1998,<sup>15</sup> the heavy investment of organizational, political and professional resources in Tatar language teaching across the

school system in the previous five years had not resulted in a significant shift towards bilingualism; Russian-speaking pupils were not starting to use Tatar. The research offers various explanations for this failure, but they are primarily connected with problems with the level of professionalism and teaching methods on the one hand, and the influence of more general social factors on the other, which combined to slow down the process. The research shows that the serious lack of Tatar language specialists in schools means that non-specialists often have to take classes, leading to lower standards. However, there is further evidence that there is a problem with *attitudes* to learning the Tatar language, a certain lack of respect or tolerance towards other languages and cultures.<sup>16</sup> The approach to the Tatar language is quite different, depending on whether pupils come from a Tatar or a non-Tatar *gymnásia*. In non-Tatar schools, there is evidence of an instrumental approach towards Tatar language learning. In Tatar *gymnásias*, both pupils and teachers express the 'primordial' quality of their ties to the language and therefore to their collective identity.

These distinctions between instrumental, symbolic and 'elemental' types of connection between language and ethnicity are found in other contexts of ethnic and national revival in the post-Soviet sphere, including the Baltic republics and regions of the Russian Federation. Latvia, for example, a newly independent state in 1991, reversed the policy of the Soviet era and privileged Latvian as the national language. According to Björklund (2004) the country's post-communist policy is a mirror image of the national politics of the Soviet period. In their report on a survey of language attitudes among Estonian school pupils, Ehala and Niglas (2006) argue that while the link between language and identity is strong, it now has to be understood in terms of a linguistic economy at the global as well as national level. A study of the Buryat minority in the Russian far east suggests a pattern of integration with the Russian majority in which the Buryat language is losing significance except as a cultural marker, although the loss of the language does not threaten the ethnic identity itself (Khilkhanova and Khilkhanov, 2004). As Spolsky suggests, such variety of patterns comes about because language policy is shaped in several ways: by everyday practices and language choices; by general beliefs about language; its social and political significance; and by deliberate interventions such as educational strategies (2004: 5). Language policy in Tatarstan as a whole is too complex to fit comfortably with either the explanation of a nation-state building strategy or educational policies to revitalize a minority language in decline (Paulston and Heidemann, 2006). The Tatar schools, however, embody aspects of both in circumstances that reflect broader political as well as cultural imperatives. Language in this institutional context is the 'central source and marker of peoplehood' (Macdonald, 1997: 219). Particularly in circumstances of transition and economic instability, or periods of political and social insecurity, language

becomes a symbol of cohesion, an indicator of heritage and roots, a symbolic and political force allowing people to proclaim their belonging to a certain group. This is clearly expressed in the institutional and everyday discourses of the Tatar *gymnásias*. It is confirmed by Iskhakov's<sup>17</sup> work in relation to the question why people considered themselves to be Tatar. He found that language usually appeared as one of the strongest indicators of identity. However, Sagitova<sup>18</sup> observed that 'family tradition' is also important because respondents typically say in response to the question why they consider themselves to be Tatar: 'if my parents are Tatars, so am I' or 'it is a matter of tradition'. Within Tatar schools, language is the main symbol of the tradition.

The Tatar language revival in Tatarstan can be seen as an awakening from the 'long sleep' of the period of Russification. The transformation is palpable, allowing people to observe and gauge its progress and the development of Tatar communication in different spheres of everyday life, from schools to mass media, and from shops to the workplace. During the fieldwork in both of the Tatar *gymnásias*, there was an observable tendency among pupils and teachers to repeat and combine certain sets of words. References to Tatar language, history, traditions, past and culture, were continuously prefaced by the possessive adjective 'our', suggesting a uniform self- and collective identity. Similarly, the notion of language is commonly associated with a notion of *natsiia*, where the language is the most essential defining feature. Therefore if you live in Tatarstan, you are supposed to speak Tatar, because people, place and language are inseparable, echoing Kaiser's statement that language is 'one of the most important objective characteristics of the nation' (1994: 253). Ideas of the union between the Tatar language and Tatar culture, identity and history, are also shared by the Tatar nationalist movements, although these movements are not synonymous with the more general renaissance. Language revival was one of the main demands made by TOTS (The Tatar Public Centre, created in 1988, representing a national front, involved in political and cultural areas) and Itiffak (the nationalist party) to the government as the key element of the ethno-cultural renewal process.

The romantic nationalism discourse does not preclude some recognition of the instrumental value of the language. A father explained:

I am Tatar by *natsional'nost* [ . . . ] and nowadays there is a demand in society to know your mother tongue. And I would like our son to know Tatar better than I do, so he will be able to speak, to read, he will not be determined enough, this is the main reason. And in the future, politics . . . to lead the republic, the Ministry of Education is working in that direction, they are developing national cadres.

The idea is presented in terms of a simple logic. This parent anticipates that knowledge of Tatar language will bring access to the political arena, not to any specific administrative position, but to the national elite.

Tatar language will become the most important language, and all Russians will be able to speak Tatar. Since we live in Tatarstan, we already speak Russian, and they live in Tatarstan, but they cannot speak Tatar, why is that? If they are living in our country! (Female pupil, 15 years old)

Pupils and teachers in fact accept the importance of Russian, and this pupil was neither trying to downgrade the importance of the Russian language, nor to defend a monolingual society. It is more a question of the Russian speaking population's attitude to the Tatar language, the evident lack of respect towards the language or lack of interest in learning it. In response to the question whether she noticed that the Russian population was beginning to speak Tatar, her immediate reaction was a spontaneous laugh with a categorical: '*Nyet*' ('no').

They study it, but they do not speak it, I have never heard a Russian speaking Tatar. Every time that we meet with them, with Russian friends, and I like them very much indeed, we always speak Russian.

In Tatar *gymnásias*, the Tatar language prevails as the medium of instruction, even though some Russian is heard in conversation. In contrast, there are no signs of Tatar language in non-Tatar *gymnásias*, except when it is taught as a second language. According to Mingazovna<sup>19</sup> (a specialist in national education in the Ministry of Education), currently around 97 percent of the students in the Republic of Tatarstan study Tatar; evidence of the recent 'boom' in the Tatar language. It is certainly a notable achievement that Russian pupils are studying Tatar, and what is even more significant, that they comprehend at least formally the importance and the relevance of learning the language. It would have been unthinkable before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, pupils and teachers from non-Tatar schools would never assume equal status for the Russian and Tatar languages.

But currently . . . we have to learn Tatar language, the result is that they are forcing us, because I think if a person wants to study Tatar – they can do it- but if they don't want to, they should not have to study it. We are having some difficulties with it. I think Russians at least should not take the exams. [. . .] I don't think that everyone needs it. The ones who want – they can study it, and the ones who don't . . . Tatars, if they are Tatars, they should know their vernacular, but not to put pressure to such a degree. Because now, apart from Tatar language and Tatar literature, Tatar history is also introduced, and Tatarstan geography. But perhaps it is necessary to know the history, but not to the extent we have to.' (Female pupil, 15 years old)

For non-Tatar *gymnásias*' pupils and teachers, Tatar language is an 'exotic' subject of minor importance. Discontent arises from the compulsion, the number of hours that pupils have to dedicate to it and the shortage of qualified teachers. Some teachers see it as damaging to the rest of the curriculum.

Yes, they don't like it. The younger children – are attending through obligation, but older children . . . are disappointed, they say: why do they give us so many hours of Tatar? [. . .] The Tatar language isn't a working language yet. Mainly, the ones who know the Tatar language, are the people who learned it at home, and spoke Tatar from their childhood- of course they have a higher level of knowledge. But in general it is not a working language, it is a Russian-speaking population, and all Tatars belong to a Russian-speaking population, Ukrainians, Jews and people from other *natsional'nosti* – they are all Russian speaking. (Russian language and literature teacher from a non-Tatar *gymnásia*)

There is little interest in questioning or recognizing the asymmetrical relationship between the two languages. The Russian-speaking population has no incentive to learn Tatar as an alternative medium for everyday interaction, to find a job, or shop in a supermarket. This is the meaning of 'working language' in the above quote – a language that people have to use. Popular culture and the media provide no incentive for Tatar language and cultural development, and in most cases pupils prefer Russian programmes (television and radio) as well as Russian magazines. Many see English as the obvious choice for a second language.

[. . .] And because there are two official languages it doesn't mean that they will need the Tatar language, and from my point of view it is necessary to dedicate more attention to English, preferably to English, than to Tatar.' (History teacher from non-Tatar *gymnásia*)

According to Baker (1992), attitudes to learning a second language reflect the combination of individual needs and social situations, and acceptance may occur when the social, economic and political environment is positive. Tatarstan has in place some of the requirements for legitimation of the Tatar language, namely official recognition and institutionalization in certain domains (May, 2001: 152). However, it is crucial how public support is encouraged, since the opposite effect can result. One of the main difficulties for the Tatar language is the inherent contradiction between its formal (bureaucratic) and informal (everyday) position, what Iskhakova describes as the distinction between *juridical status* and *real functioning* (1999: 157). Tatar continues to under-perform in its official position, because Russian is the dominant language in daily use.

That bilingualism is not a two-way process is amply confirmed by the research. Whereas most urban Tatars speak Russian, almost none of the urban Russians speak Tatar. According to the census of 1989, virtually all city-dwelling Tatars knew Russian and so did about two-thirds of the Tatars in the countryside. In contrast to this, less than 2 percent of the Russian rural population indicated that they knew Tatar (Kondrashov, 2000: 37). The subsequent development of compulsory instruction in schools, new Tatar media, and use in government institutions has generated awareness of linguistic diversity among the general population. However, a side effect of

the specialized education is to sharpen the differences between languages, between ethnic groups and within ethnic groups (for example, Tatars with and without the Tatar language).

In the particular environment of schools No. 2 and No. 16, the Tatar language is not only a medium for study or communication, or even a language that will help to bring success in a career. It is not synonymous with sophistication, or access to high technology, computers or the Internet. On the contrary, the significance of the language is strongly related to the past, proving a connection with ancestors, roots, the mother tongue. It is a key to how 'Tatarhood' is represented in the past, present and the future. For some of the generation of girls and boys from urbanized backgrounds currently studying in Tatar *gymnásias*, it is a difficult task to overcome the parental 'deficit' caused by the lack of opportunity for their parents to learn their vernacular. At the present time, there is still a high level of uncertainty and unpredictability in attitudes to language, and the mother of a female pupil knows that things can easily change again. They have grown accustomed to the instability and have learned to keep their options open because they cannot take the risk of renouncing the Russian language:

Of course what worries me is the unstable political situation, and whether pupils, when they graduate from this *gymnasia*, will find their way in this life, if they will be able to receive higher education and if they will be in demand. This is what really worries me. (Mother of a female pupil)

Tatar *gymnásias* are not only relatively new centres, they are also places of innovation that depend heavily on elite sponsorship and the character of the political relationship between the republic and the central government. Since the end of the Yeltsin period, Tatarstan has steered a difficult path between limited sovereignty and the re-centralizing tendencies of the Putin presidency. Language and educational strategies reflect this ongoing process.

Two examples of language policy illustrate this: the proposed return to the Latin alphabet and the debate concerning a Tatar University, which would teach all subjects through the medium of Tatar. In 1999, Tatarstan attempted to re-introduce the Latin alphabet for Tatar on the grounds that it is better suited to modern needs and because it is more suitable for transliteration than Cyrillic. Pilot projects began in some schools. However, federal authorities saw it as an excess of Tatarization and in 2004 the Russian Federation Constitutional Court overruled the Tatarstan law, denying republics the right to establish alphabets for national languages (*Tatar-Inform*, 2004). The Tatar University represents an important ambition for some of the Tatar population – not just for some sectors of the political elite and nationalist groups, but also for the teachers, parents and pupils from Tatar *gymnásias*. For them it would represent continuity with their work, demonstrate that the Tatar language situation is changing, and



that their efforts are generating results. The actual outcome of the project illustrates the important role of the federal authorities, the Tatarstan presidency and other interests in shaping a compromise. In time for the start of the 2005–06 academic year, President Shaimiev was instrumental in bringing about a merger between the institutions in Kazan that had been the main carriers of the Tatar ideal for higher education: the federally funded Kazan State Pedagogical University, TARI (the non-governmental Tatar-American Regional Institute) and the small Tatar State Institute for Humanities. The latter specialized in economics, law and foreign languages, with Russian as the main medium of instruction. The new institution, housed in a new building in the centre of Kazan, is called the ‘Tatar State Humanities-Pedagogical University’. Its financial viability is secured by core funding from the federal government, signalling an inclination from Moscow to establish stable relations with the Tatar language and culture. However, it will not be an exclusively Tatar-medium institution. To the dismay of some nationalists, the potential symbolic power of the university has been diminished through this compromise (Machneva, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

Schools, in consort with other institutions, create and reproduce concrete and specific symbols, a cultural representation that simultaneously reinforces a sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘communality’, as well as ‘otherness’ and ‘differentiation’. There is a direct connection between Tatar *gymnásias* and some sectors of the Tatar political elite, articulated through an intra-elite process, mutually and dynamically reinforced by everyday life in families and schools. The research shows that there is close correspondence between attitudes at home and school. Pupils in the 14–16 age group repeat what they hear in school and accept without much hesitation what the adults claim. There is no evidence of the subcultures of ‘resistance’ described in many studies of schooling elsewhere. According to Tatar culture, the voice of the elders has to be listened to and accepted, and this may help to explain why the correspondence appears to be closer than in other settings. Pupils hear, accept and reproduce what are portrayed as the advantages of ethno-cultural segregation. They uphold the belief in Tatar language primordiality, the need to reinforce and maintain monocultural environments (including Tatar schools), and marriage only within the group (Tatar endogamy), as mechanisms to ensure group cohesion and the survival of Tatar culture.

Tatar language was the priority topic of concern inside both Tatar *gymnásias* during the period when this research was conducted. The evidence confirms Schöpflin’s observation that the role of language as an

ethnic marker has been especially salient in central and eastern Europe (2000: 118) and, by extension, the former Soviet Union. It illustrates the Hungarian writer Gyula Illyés' saying that 'the nation lives in its language' (quoted in Schöpflin 2000: 120). In these countries, the view of language as 'primordial' is still widely accepted as the strongest source of attachment to a community, a group or a nation, and to its national symbols (songs, stories and anthems) because these representations are transmitted through language. The language is the mechanism to protect and keep them alive. 'Ethnicity may not be related to language, whereas language as a boundary marker is always related to ethnicity' (Haarmann 1986: 261). Language, not religion or ethnicity, was the epicentre of the discourses reproduced in the school settings. Its importance is underlined by the visible changes taking place in the republic involving the Tatar language. For pupils and teachers it was the clearest marker of the boundaries between the idea of 'ourselves' and 'others'.

However, differences between Tatars and non-Tatars in attitudes to the language, different readings of history, and differences in representing the 'other', cannot be understood in terms of interaction between ethno-cultural or national groups without reference to institutional strategies. They play an explicit role in reinforcing and promoting specific attitudes and representations. The research revealed the strength of the essentialist interpretation of the Tatar language inside the Tatar *gymnásias*. This contrasts with non-Tatar *gymnásias*, where the fact that Tatar language is also an official language in the republic is tolerated without much enthusiasm, and indeed with some hostility, because of the number of hours, poor organization and inadequately trained teachers. One side of the coin represents hope, anticipation and illusion; the other represents very desultory interest and absence of curiosity about Tatar language or Tatar culture. The lack of respect and attention is a matter of increasing concern for the future if the objective is to build an egalitarian society, and if the various mechanisms and structures needed to bring about a change in pupils' and teachers' attitudes are to work successfully. The fact that bilingualism appears as a one-way process historically (and currently, as this research illustrates) reinforces feelings of injustice, unfairness, inequality, cultural domination and discrimination. What some sectors of the population see as just the beginning of a Tatar cultural and linguistic revival is, for others, an unbalanced and asymmetrical national policy.

Tatar *gymnásias* epitomize resistance to the decline of the Tatar language and culture. They are places where pupils can learn about the history of Tatarstan and its traditions, learn Arabic and become familiar with Islam. They provide spaces where patriotism for Tatarstan is accentuated, an environment where new narratives of the Tatar people are in a state of effervescence and where a primordial understanding of 'Tatarhood' is in an advanced stage of elaboration. On the other hand, inside non-Tatar

*gymnásias*, Tatar culture and traditions are relegated to a marginal position, and English and French are the two main languages that pupils prefer to learn. Tatarization is a response to centuries of cultural attrition within the Russian and Soviet empires that could have resulted in a complete loss of identity. While the policies of Russification and Sovietization leading to marginalization have not ceased to have an effect, bit by bit they are being unravelled. How Tatar education will develop will depend on global influences, the fate of the 'Tatarstan model' and policies in Moscow, as well as what happens within the republic. At this time it is difficult to say where the processes of ethnic and national categorization, discursive frames and institutional projects will lead. The current emphasis is on cohabitation between the two main groups, Tatars and Russians. In the prevailing climate, there is general agreement that peaceful cohabitation is possible. It is difficult to imagine in the context of Tatarstan a violent conflict or nationalist explosion, since the relationship between the main population groups is based on a practical attempt to find a consensus. However, the example of Tatar schooling shows that this consensus is not yet grounded in a shared understanding of language, ethnicity or cultural diversity.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Enacted on 30 November 1992. Full version available at <http://www.tatar.ru>.
- 2 For a full account see Alvarez Veinguer (2002).
- 3 On the 'Tatarstan Model' see Drobizheva, 1997 and Iskhakov, 1997b, especially pp. 123–53.
- 4 The population of Tatarstan is 3.8 million, approximately half of whom are Tatars. In Kazan, the site of this study, the main ethnic groups in 2001 were Tatar (51.3%), Russian (41%) and Chuvash (about 3%). See the official website of the Republic of Tatarstan: <http://www.tatar.ru>.
- 5 Lilia Varisovna Sagitova (Senior Researcher in ethnology at the Institute of History of Tatarstan) showed that 78.1 percent of the political elite are Tatars (Sagitova, 1998). Löwenhardt (1997) indicated that by 1995 only 20 percent of the chiefs of administration of the districts and cities and 25 percent of the Chairmen of District Soviets were ethnic Russians. Matsuzato (2001) describes the regime as 'centralized caciquismo', involving strong personal influences and state institutions that resemble those of the Soviet period.
- 6 Literally translated from Russian. Interview with Mukhariamov, Nial' Midkhatovich, Doctor of Politics, Dean and Head of the Department of Social Sciences, Kazan University of Energy, 15 September 2000.

- 7 A *gymnásia* was a secondary school of highest grade preparing for universities in pre-Revolutionary Russia. In Russian, the 'national' in national education (*natsional'noe obrazovanie*) is understood to refer primarily to ethnicity.
- 8 Principles of State Policy in the Sphere of Education (Eklof and Dneprov, 1993).
- 9 All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the Tatar *gymnasias*, the sample consisted of six teachers, 14 pupils (aged 14–16 years) and three parents. In the non-Tatar *gymnasias*, six teachers and 21 pupils were interviewed. Seven Headmistresses from different *gymnasias* were also interviewed, and the 13 experts included the Minister of Education and the State Adviser to the President on Political Affairs.
- 10 The notion of identization emphasizes the idea that identities are always in movement (Melucci, 1996), and invariably involve 'a process in process'. It is a way of thinking beyond categorical group identities (Brubaker, 2004, Ch. 2).
- 11 Not all Tatars would feel as comfortable talking to a Russian researcher as to a western researcher, but fluency in language is essential for collecting good quality data. The in-between role of the researcher allowed respondents to position themselves in relation to the 'participant' or 'stranger' as they chose. For reasons of time, the researcher did not undertake to learn Tatar. It was not essential for data collection as all respondents spoke fluent Russian and documents are generally available in Russian.
- 12 It is interesting to note that the headmistress made a strong point of the fact that five or six pupils come from mixed families, where only one of the parents is Tatar, and that some pupils are from converted (Kryashen) Tatar backgrounds.
- 13 Interview, 23 November 1998.
- 14 According to Rafael Khakimov (2004) 'polls show that over 80 percent of the Tatar youth consider themselves Muslim, but only 2 percent attend mosque at least once a week, and 4 percent attend just once a month'.
- 15 *Tatarskii iazyk v shkolakh RT v konteskte sovremennykh sotsial'no-obrazovatel'nykh tendentsii: sostoianie, problemy, perspektivy*. Kazan' 1998: Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia RT. Laboratoriia sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniï IPKRO RT (Tatar language in schools of RT through current context of social – educational tendencies: conditions, problems, perspectives. Kazan. 1998. Ministry of Education of RT. Laboratory of Sociological Research RT). Although the research was sponsored by the Ministry, the results are consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g. Yerofeyev and Nizamova, 2001) and the results presented here.
- 16 According to research in other contexts, the general acceptability or 'tolerability' of the minority language by majority language speakers is essential to overcome marginalization (Grin, 1995 cited in May, 2001: 14).
- 17 Iskhakov, Damir Mavliaveevich, Doctor of History, researcher in the ethnology department of the Institute of History, Tatarstan Academy of Sciences, Head of the Center of Ethnological Monitoring. Interview, 17 March 1998.
- 18 Interview, March 1998.
- 19 Interview, 4 February 1998.

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